

# **Newcomers in American Schools**

## **Meeting the Educational Needs of Immigrant Youth**



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**PROGRAM FOR RESEARCH ON IMMIGRATION POLICY**

**RAND**

The research described in this report was supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and by the Program for Research on Immigration Policy.

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

McDonnell, Lorraine, 1947-

Newcomers in American schools : meeting the educational needs of immigrant youths / Lorraine M. McDonnell, Paul T. Hill.

p. cm.

“Supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Program for Research on Immigration Policy.”

Includes bibliographical references (p. ).

“MR-103-AWM/PRIP.”

ISBN 0-8330-1392-0

1. Children of immigrants—Education—United States—Case studies. 2. Children of immigrants—Education—Social aspects—United States—Case studies. 3. Education and state—United States. I. Hill, Paul Thomas, 1943-. II. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. III. RAND. IV. Title.

LC3746.M33 1993  
371.96750973—dc20

93-19883  
CIP

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## SUMMARY

The United States is now experiencing a wave of immigration unprecedented since the early 1900s, with the most recent Census showing that nine million people emigrated here during the 1980s. The more than two million immigrant youth who enrolled in U.S. public schools over the past decade represent significant challenges for local school systems. Like earlier waves of immigrant students, most are concentrated in a few large cities; they are typically poor; many have suffered the traumas of war, civil strife, or economic deprivation; and all must learn the language and customs of a new country. But recent newcomers hail from a more diverse range of cultures than earlier groups, which were primarily European.

Despite the significant numbers of immigrant students now entering U.S. schools, their unique needs are only dimly recognized by federal and state policymakers. Those who are most aware of these students are the educators who work in the local districts where most immigrants are concentrated. These teachers and administrators express optimism about their ability to educate immigrant children and to integrate them successfully into American life. But their efforts are largely ad hoc, dependent on the willingness and ability of individual educators, rather than the result of concerted policy initiatives.

### STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS

In this report, we examine the schooling needs of immigrant students, assess how well these needs are currently being met, and suggest strategies for improving schooling outcomes for immigrants.

The study analyzed immigrant education from a broad policy perspective, explicitly considering it as a political issue in competition for policymakers' attention and scarce public resources and as one of many challenges facing increasingly overburdened local school systems.

Although it is difficult conceptually and politically to separate an analysis of the education of immigrant students from current controversies surrounding U.S. immigration policy, the two should be viewed as separate issues. Whatever one thinks about the need for new immigration laws or stricter enforcement of existing ones, that dispute is distinct from the education of children already living in the United States. The humane reason is that these are innocent children who are in this country because of adult actions over which they have little control and who deserve the attention a caring society accords all its children. The utilitarian reason is that these children are literally the nation's future. Most of them will remain here as adults, and the quality of education they receive will shape the quality of life all Americans enjoy over the next several decades—they are tomorrow's citizens and workers.

Study data were collected from a purposive sample of nine school districts and 57 schools, chosen to reflect the range of communities in which immigrant children now live. Six districts—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, Houston, and San Francisco—were selected because together they enroll the overwhelming majority of immigrant students nationally. Visalia, California (a rural district), and Fairfax County, Virginia (a suburban district), were included because they are typical of nonurban districts that have experienced large influxes of immigrant students in recent years. On-site and telephone interviews were conducted with 240 district and school administrators, teachers, counselors, and community representatives. To supplement the statistical and interview data and obtain a systematic portrait of immigrant schooling experiences, the transcripts of 745 students enrolled in six Los Angeles schools were coded and analyzed. In addition, 38 interviews were conducted with state-level policymakers (governors' education aides, legislators, state department of education staff, and interest-group representatives) in the six states in which the sample districts are located.

## MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

Four major conclusions emerge from this research:

1. Although they represent only a fraction of the nation's youth, immigrants constitute a growing proportion of that cohort and are heavily concentrated in a few areas of the country.

Seventy-eight percent of all immigrant students who have been in the United States for three years or less attend school in just five states, with 45 percent enrolled in California. As of 1990, 11 percent of all youth living in California were born outside the United States; the proportions for New York, Florida, Texas, and Illinois range between 6 and 3 percent. Together, these five states are home to over 1.5 million immigrant youth. In the large city school districts of Los Angeles and Miami, immigrant students represent 20 percent of the total enrollment.

2. Immigrant education is not a visible policy issue. Independent of their need to learn English and to escape the consequences of poverty, immigrant students are not viewed by federal and state policymakers as a distinct group requiring unique policy remedies. That immigrants may have different needs than native-born students is not widely recognized nor accepted.

Because the costs and potential benefits from immigration fall overwhelmingly on a few states and local districts, most notably in California, the rest of the country has little incentive to concern itself with the education of immigrants. The role that the federal government plays in the schooling of immigrant students is limited. At a programmatic level, it functions as a junior partner, funding several small categorical programs that pay parts of the costs borne by states and local districts. The federal government exerts its greatest impact on immigrant education through regulation: Federal judicial decisions and civil rights enforcement have created a framework that defines the legal rights of limited-English proficiency (LEP) students, including most immigrants. Similarly, the education of immigrant children is not a definable policy issue at the state level. Most states have policies and programs for LEP students, but these were developed to meet the needs of American-born speakers of foreign languages (e.g., Puerto Ricans in New York), not immigrants. The needs and problems of immigrant students are rarely considered indepen-

dent of their status as non-English speakers. In state policymaking, immigrant education is equated with bilingual education, and it therefore bears all the emotional baggage left over from divisive debates about bilingual education and native-language maintenance. Immigrant students' other needs, derived from their status as newcomers who have fled poor and war-torn areas, are seldom recognized.

3. The quality of schooling that immigrant students receive largely depends on the capacity of the local communities in which they reside. Yet most of these districts and schools lack the human and fiscal resources to educate students well, whether they are immigrant or native-born.

With very few exceptions, the teachers and administrators who serve immigrant children do so with care and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, the school districts serving the largest numbers of immigrant students are deeply troubled and frequently fail to provide high-quality educational services to students of all sorts, including native-born, low- and middle-income children, as well as immigrants. Big-city school districts lack the assets normally considered necessary for the education of language-minority students. Although a few have adequate supplies of Spanish-speaking teachers, none can guarantee that immigrants speaking other languages will be taught by bilingual teachers. These districts also lack appropriate instructional materials and can do little for the increasing numbers of older immigrant students who arrive having had little formal schooling in their native countries. Few schools have routine, easy access to the educational, health, and social support services desperately needed by students who must cope with the effects of poverty and the traumas associated with leaving one culture and adjusting to another.

Policymakers and academics continue to debate whether bilingual education should be primarily a vehicle for teaching students English or whether it should provide an ongoing link to their native language and culture. However, in most school districts enrolling large numbers of immigrant students, the logic of necessity overwhelms either side of that debate. In general, school systems offer at least some bilingual education to new immigrant students whenever possible. But the needs of students who speak no English are so great and the instructional resources so scarce that few districts are able to offer

any native-language instruction to those who are even moderately competent in English.

Despite the unique needs of immigrant students, however, many of the service gaps they experience also adversely affect U.S.-born students. These stem from the current condition of big-city school districts—their inability to cope with growing fiscal deficits, facility overcrowding, shortages of qualified teachers, and weak links to other community institutions. Large urban districts are failing to educate a high proportion of their students—nearly half drop out before graduation in some cities—and some of the larger districts are unable to ensure the safety of students and teachers while in school.

4. Immigrant students have unmet educational needs that are unique to their newcomer status. But the best way to help immigrant students is to strengthen the school systems that serve them, not to create new categorical programs that single out immigrants for special benefits.

The quality of immigrant education depends on the fundamental strength and competence of big-city school systems. The financial and educational weaknesses of those school systems impede any effort to improve schooling for immigrant children. Certainly, strategies need to be promoted that are specific to improving the educational outcomes of immigrant students. However, the most effective way to improve schooling for immigrant students is to enhance the overall capacity of urban school systems.

Although current educational reform proposals can help strengthen urban schools, they do not go far enough. They assume that school systems have the resources necessary to improve their own performance, if only efforts are properly focused by means of goals, standards, and accountability measures. School systems that are beset by debt, declining and unstable revenues, dilapidated buildings, and inadequate instructional resources cannot improve simply by trying harder.

Some way must be found for the federal government and states to move beyond their current emphasis on small categorical programs to help big cities improve their school systems across the board. This effort needs to engage a broad range of private- and public-sector institutions, and continued assistance should be contingent on school

performance, but it must happen. Immigrant students and their urban schoolmates constitute a key segment of the country's future economic and social life. If their opportunities for a productive and satisfying life are not significantly enhanced, the consequences will be felt far beyond the five states where most immigrants now live.